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Let's talk about madness. Immediately after my father's divorce, he picked me up by the pants and said, "We're leaving, on a business trip," and I didn't have much say in the matter. I only knew, knowing my father, there would be little to no business on such a trip.

A sly and charming 15 year old, I knew what break ups felt like, and I supposed that divorce was the ultimate of breakups. What a strange thing to say. But father didn't wish to talk about it. He read a novel, a small fat novel, and we rested at a gate of the Denver airport. He and I watched a frantic couple, with child and baby, breathe and talk with very, very little patience to the gate desk attendants.

"You see, we've got to all fly together. I can't be on a separate plane. My son and daughter need to have seats by me or my wife, on this plane. I don't want them sitting next to strangers, and we need to be in Portland by tomorrow," the man said.

"He looks much too young to be a parent," my father told me.

"I can't believe you can do this," the man said.

He asked if he could buy a ticket off another passenger.

"That is prohibited, sir," the gate attendant said.

"I could give them my ticket," I told my father. I wondered if I could make money off such a thing. A little spending cash, that maybe father couldn't budget or control. His frown resembled dry, cracked vomit.

"You will do no such thing. They can take responsibility for their poor actions."

And, yes, perhaps he was right, in his way of the world. The husband hunched over the desk and continued to jab his finger at the jaw-hung flight attendant. The wife wore an orange moomoo with pink pastel daisies behind her ear. Every once in a while the eldest boy, about four, would walk away from the group and sneak behind the desk or into a trash can, or through the emergency exit,

or speed off towards the boarding ramp and every frustrated attempt ended in failure. The wife never yelled at the child. Just gave the eldest a pat on the head, not that worried, and then he'd do it all over again.

My father pointed a few things out, things he believed to be self-evident. "Look at how they're behaving, son. That child running undisciplined, it's the sign of bad parenting. That is not the sort of life you want to lead. Those are the regretful clothes of those sorts of people that you should never aspire to be. They're transients, with children, and that is irresponsible. They look like transients. Do you know what transients are? Despite what your mother says, these sorts of people are unhappy, in the least," he said. "You are such a fine young man. You shouldn't dare waste what you are."

And here, my father said, "You don't ever want to be those people."

And here, I said, "Okay." I couldn't say what I believed.

When the flight delayed, my father told me he would be back, and gave me forty dollars and told me to watch his bags.

"I'm going to get a drink," he said. I was fifteen, and I could not join him. I couldn't figure out why airports sold so much alcohol until watching the interaction between the gate attendant and the transient couple, who I knew were not transients in any sense of the word other than "to move or go across." Being in an airport, they obviously had the intention of doing so.

None of this I gave word of to my father. But father's words burned like wildfire. So I watched the transient couple, huddling in the corner and holding their children as though the wind inside the room was bitter, and the light harsh. It was not my responsibility, I thought. So I read a book, a book of Ginsberg poems, the one that I know father believed to be some icky fetish of mine, but I so loved it and I stayed quieter and quieter about the things I loved, because surely father would raise his voice or hand against them.

Fifteen minutes until the gate departure, father had yet to arrive and I began to worry. Only so many bars could fit in an airport, and so I asked the gate attendant to point me in the direction of

the nearest, and she gave me a crooked finger pointing to the East, where I found him somewhere past a tourism advertisement for the city of Denver, a man in business formal attire and a plastered smile on his face. I found father in a faux Irish pub, where he had taken a seat at the bar. As I approached, he leaned to his left on a voluptuous woman who shifted uncomfortably and smelled of whiskey. The Seahawks caught a touchdown on the television in front of him, and he threw his beer to the cement floor where it crashed and spread like urine.

"God dammit! God dammit!" he said, and the woman next to him jumped. He snarled at this woman, who had ratty brown hair from behind and looked an awful lot like my mother, which made sense when all was said and done. No one in the faux Irish pub, with its opening face towards an airport of frantic, sober people, told him to mop up his own mess.

"They can't do shit right. Do you know?" He grabbed the voluptuous woman by her shirt and tipped sideways, swaying and using her skirt as an object of balance. "Do you know who I am?" he asked again. Something in his throat, entirely inhuman, bayed at the contrived orange lights of the airport bar that mimicked the all-devouring light of streetlamps at night. He sniffed the woman's hair and twirled it around his finger, and at this point I could not see her face, or the fear or maybe madness in her eyes, or maybe the pain red in her cheeks with blood and warmth.

"Come with me darling," he said to the woman. "I promise that I will love you, and love you." He grabbed at her breast and squeezed, hard enough to hurt, which almost tore the thin fabric of her shirt. She punched him right in the teeth, and no one did anything about it other than watch, and even there I thought, this is what he deserves, and I've never thought that about anybody. He let the blood pour from his mouth and it bubbled like foam. Never did he bother hiding the ghoulish thing from me, the dangling tooth that would soon enough leave a black hole, but rather there he let it swing on its bloody hinge.

"There you are," Father said to me, and nothing more. I found this odd, but I didn't want to say so much. This was the first time I had ever flown, and the first time I had ever seen a grown man

lose a tooth. I observed, and observed, and observed, for fear of playing, for father had taught me to always fear losing.

Father spoke with an uncoordinated, wet lisp from then on. Spit dribbled from the wound when he spoke with the authority he had become so accustomed to; nor could he punctuate his words. On a normal day, he put the fear of God in his dental consonants.

In the hotel, after pressing a room key into my hand, he told me, "Nickolas, when you unpack your things let's find a spot to eat. I'm hungry, aren't you?" I said yes, I was, though really I was rarely hungry. Then he pulled something from his backpack, and I looked at him with deft surprise.

"I purchased this for you in the airport bookstore. It's quite a read." The book title read "How to Win Friends and Influence People," in thin popping letters. He rested it in my hand. "In graduate school, this was my bible. I saw it and thought of you. And it makes for a good read. Maybe not as good as that Ginsberg of yours, but this makes a practical read, at the least."

"Ginsberg?" I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I see you reading him. You shouldn't be afraid of me, Nickolas. This is a different place here, and we should have fun here." He said "fun" as though it was a new taste. "This weekend is about us, and we should go for pizza. I have business to attend to later this afternoon, and for those hours I should not be disturbed. But perhaps you can meet Michael, my editor. In fact, I think you would enjoy that immensely."

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked, for these words felt forced and strange from him.

"The pain is excruciating," he said. Here he rubbed his mouth, and went to the bathroom with a bottle of ibuprofen.

Father prided himself on keeping to the East side of town, on this side of the Willamette, because maybe he enjoyed the smell of molding gutter water and, on the East side, it didn't feel so much like Seattle, or just any old city. Portland without the Xeroxed street grids, an abundance of dental operations (for unexplainable reasons), the bookstores and the obscure hipster pizza joints felt less like Portland and more like just a place. On the East side, it all

fluttered and breathed together beneath that omniscient Northwest sky that dealt only in shades of grey, and just when you believed the world had dried itself to completion, you would find yourself wrong. We skipped across puddles, freshly wet cement, and the slippery honeycomb grids of the Hawthorne Bridge. Most, if not all, these Portlandians walked with purpose and long strides, as though everyone was heading somewhere, and no one was there to hurt you.

"Business" for my father was having lunch with his *Newsweek* editor in a cluttered soup and sandwich place across the Willamette River. A lanky man with a blonde-white comb-over and a teardrop tattoo on the visible side of his wrist prepared fresh deli meats and smiled at me as my father and I entered.

Father introduced me to the only other suited man in the room, who I presumed was Michael, the *Newsweek* editor, and who introduced himself as "Mr. Mike Sterns, your father's editor."

"It's great to meet you," I said, wishing my hand was stronger.

"I know it's cliché, and I hate to revel in clichés, but your father has told me plenty about you," said Mr. Sterns. His face pulled tight against his teeth when he smiled.

"This is Nickolas. He just started reading Dale Carnegie's book, didn't he? It's what got me into the business. I'm hoping he might learn a thing or two," said father. I did not know who Dale Carnegie was, nor did I really mind, for father did this more often than one would think. Tell small, white lies to his co-workers and friends about me, lies that I could not interpret one way or another.

"Shit. What happened to your tooth?" Mr. Sterns asked.

"Oh, just some trouble with the sink. Chipped a tooth on it, if you can believe it. Quite an accident, I can tell you about it. Say, Nickolas," father said, "here's forty dollars and you can go explore the city. You're old enough now to do things on your own, aren't you? I will call when Mr. Sterns and I have concluded here."

"Say, you say your boy likes books? There's a bookstore on Burnside Street with an amazing section on the third floor entirely dedicated to Networking. Networking, can you believe it? In this day and age. The world is going in a grand direction, and I'm excited to see it to the end. Go check out an author: Simon Sinek. That's

S-I-N-E-K, not cynic with a 'C,' He's one of the new Greats."

"I'll be sure to," I said. "I do love books."

The words, I hoped, didn't seem sarcastic or ironic, for I did love and desire for books, just not the way Father or this new, stranger of a man might hope. But something about the forty new dollars crinkled in my hand, and the grey sky outside, and the new abundance of people, and the man behind the counter chopping and chopping and chopping at thin slices of ham while smiling, red-eyed and smelling of marijuana, and yes the cold Northwest, the cold, cold Northwest. Things didn't make sense as much as they used to. This place was different. Something about it I both loved and feared, and most of all desired. Among these purposefully walking young men and women, these sad, cold days, I felt that I fit here, and that father did not.

"This is small business. This is small-game city. Just try New York. It's not a city unless you can smell it, and this is just too clean," father said. He had food in his stomach, and he felt happier and warmer here. "Cities smell like puke and diesel, or fish if you're talking about Seattle. I'll take you there sometime, next time I'm on assignment. In November I have an article about the jazz scene there, and I would enjoy your company."

"I'd like to go there," I said. "Actually, that would be nice."

We came upon the grounded base of Burnside Bridge, its monstrous cement drawbridges up and raised and open, welcoming a quiet ferry through. A cluster of homeless men, mostly men and one woman, encamped here in weather-blue sleeping bags and mangled backpacks of all sorts, covered in dirt from the earth, and in the corner of it all a massive heap of shopping carts, white tarps, ragtag items such as half-burned books, plastic sacks, cardboard, and here they did not smell but the complete absence of smell felt disturbing to me, like a vacuum.

One of them, a man, looked up at my father and me in surprise. He had tough brown skin and permanent facial hair, and furrowed, bushy brows that looked as though they'd been rubbed on with coal and cat hair. On his body he wore jeans and, oddly enough, a corduroy jacket with minimum wear. There at the greenway's edge

he parked with himself, a small, resting ferret curled in a spiral at his side, a black crate upon which he sat, and a scrap of cardboard that read, "Check your commodity fetishism."

The man swung to his feet, as though alarmed by our presence, and my father grabbed me and instinctively placed me behind him.

"Sit back down," my father told the man, whose cracking hands rose in peace or defense.

"Hey, no worries. Me and my friends here just want to know if you have change. Just a little change, sir. A little goes a long way, like they say," the man said, in careful, practiced English. My father's face distorted, and said nothing, as though he couldn't understand the man.

I shuffled through my wallet and counted the seventy seven dollars and eighty cents therein, my father's money here. "I have some change," I said. "Change for how much?"

"He wants your money," father said. "He wants your change, not trying to break bills."

"Have respect, sir. Let the boy do what he wants. Whatever helps will help, really," the corduroy man said. He said this as though he was a grandparent, though he may have been twenty years my father's junior, though the broken patterns and dust on his skin made him glow as though in all kinds of ancient understanding.

"Father," I said. "I would like to give this man some change, if that's okay."

"That money isn't yours to give, son."

The corduroy man said, "Listen, I take baths in rivers. You look like kind people, and me and my friends could use the help, sir."

"I can't understand you. Please, leave my son and I alone," father said. He fumbled with his own words, sputtered them out in failed launches and choking sounds. His eyes darted left, then up, then behind him and he couldn't seem to meet the man's eyes, or mine, and here my father growled maniacally. My father extracted a can of pepper spray from inside his suit jacket, and sprayed it in the direction of the corduroy man, who shielded his eyes and jumped away and hid behind a stone pillar. Here my father barked at him, some words, as though the corduroy man was crazy and here he was barking at him, baying at the corduroy man like a feral

creature.

"Back down now, or I will call the police. I will call the police. Don't talk my son, don't talk to him ever, don't corrupt him. He will never be like you," my father said, and I wasn't sure of the point of all this howling and scratching as father scuffled away and ruined his polished black dress shoes. Stray gravel left marks. His steps lead him dangerously close to the river itself, the great Willamette, which I presumed to be deceptively calm.

We fled, or rather, father fled and I took one last glimpse at the corduroy man, and he waved to me while with the other hand he stroked the ferret, now in his lap. The way he waved: opening and closing his fingers and the hypnotic, content swing of his arm. These things stunned me, his gentleness and his flair, and the way he had addressed my father as "sir." This man, to be honest, did not seem like the kind of person that father claimed him to be.

"They have homes for those sorts of people," father said. Sweat made his face look hoary and red. "He'll be fine, the government has programs for that. That's why I pay taxes, and why it's important that you pay taxes, and why economic stability is important so that you can build an account of charitable funds and donate directly to good causes such as—such as the shelter, that is here, somewhere. Surely Portland has one, there are plenty of those sorts of people lumbering around. It is important that you get a good job, a safe job and a healthy job. It won't always be fun. It may never be fun, but providing for your family is such a higher calling. Do not let the hipsters or the liberals tell you otherwise." Father held me close. He brought me in to the stinking of his armpits and said, "I love you. Don't become that. I love you."

"I don't understand," I said, and to this father asked, "What isn't there to understand?"

"He didn't seem insane."

"That wasn't happiness. That was illness, preying on him like it will all of us. We are such fragile beings, Nickolas."

"It just didn't seem that way."

Father stopped me by the shoulder, and held my hand and kneeled. "That is not happiness. Those are people that have tricked themselves into being happy with nothing, and to nothing they will

amount, I swear to you. Please don't think it is anything else. They will never leave their legacy on this world, which you must do. You must mean something, and those people mean nothing."

"What about mom?" I said.

"What?" father said, and we became hypnotized in one another.

"Mom said most of the painters she teaches about rarely had a nickel on them. But they were happy."

"Nickolas, they were sad, sad people. They often committed suicide before their time. It's not the life you want."

"But she said they were much better off."

"Than who?"

"Than you."

Father broke in small pieces, his eyes falling softly, his lips parting slowly.

"Your mother is wrong," he said. "I don't know who she is."

I knew for a fact that three in the morning every morning father had a terrible, keen insomnia that woke him for fifteen minutes, and would not let him back to sleep until then. During this time, he would stare out the nearest window, or take a walk, or sometimes he would rebel against such torture and make a pot of coffee, and instead of succumbing to sleep again he would work in his maple-colored office until dawn, when he would put on sweats and run for hours without water. It shook him like a nightmare, he once said. Around midnight, when I knew father would be asleep and would not wake for another three hours, I opted to take a walk onto the greenway, to find the man in the corduroy jacket.

At the base of the Burnside Bridge I found a small fire, and the corduroy man and a woman with him sitting at the front of this fire. I tried introducing myself, but neither seemed to hear, and finally I moved from the ivory lights of the greenway to beneath the bridge, where the parking lot felt sticky and littered with waste and all but the light of the fire forsook me.

"Yes?" the woman asked. "What do you want?" She rocked the corduroy man's head in her lap, back and forth. Gently.

"Yes, I was wondering if I could sit here. I was looking for him," I said, pointing to the man. "I saw him earlier on the trail

today and I wanted to apologize. I acted very poorly towards him and I wanted to make up for it." I reached into my wallet and extended the assortment of bills within, the seventy-seven dollars and some change. The woman looked at the money, and at my hand, and her brows frowned and cheek bones bloated outwards.

"We don't want your money, but thank you. His name is Rafael. My name is Jeanne Loretta Smith, and I am just a traveler passing through."

Rafael, the corduroy man, slept on this woman's lap, and when I sat across from them, feeling the hard and cold earth against my pants and disliking it an immense amount, I noticed cracked, dry blood matted his forehead, and that his unruly, damp hair glistened in the firelight.

"What happened?" I asked.

"No. He's not okay, I wouldn't think so. He'll die tonight, yes. Some men on the bank threw bread crumbs for a flock of swans earlier today, and in broad daylight Rafael jumped for the crumbs and cracked his head on a rock beneath the river's surface. I'm not sure why, but I really only knew him this morning. The rest of my group found a ride to the East from here and I volunteered to stay and make sure Rafael would not die, but unfortunately it seems as though he may."

"I can call an ambulance. I have a phone in my hand."

"Thanks, but please, let him die. He'll do it in front of you, if you wait."

"I don't like this feeling."

"I know, but everything dies. It makes me sad, yes. Every day. It's made me lonely on a number of occasions. We die out here, and not a lot in the world changes, especially as of late. We're here, and we're here." Jeanne stroked the corduroys man's hair, and not a drip of blood had touched his jacket.

"What did you know of him?" I asked.

"He mumbled a lot, and this morning we watched the river just after sunrise. It was much too cold to sleep, as is life. The apathetic Willamette, oh yes. Watch it now, it rips through the bay without end, I see. As carefree of your problems or my problems as it is the number of rings on Saturn."

"That is quite beautiful," I said.

"I hoped one day I could meet a man like Rafael and become less small, and I wouldn't say I loved him, but really when you're out here and there's nothing other than the others who are also out here, you fall in to a lot of trouble trying to make yourself big. So we fall in love easily. It's really a scary thing. My dad told me about a man named Maslow. He was a psychologist. He said that love is impossible to find when you're hungry, or when you can't find warmth, but if anything I think love can feed those things a thousand times better than anything else can. I think Maslow is a damnable liar."

I found all this to be awfully and chaotically beautiful.

"Just who are you? Where are you from? I wish I could know more about you," I said.

"I'm not so different from you. You don't say much, but I feel as though you love, and you love a lot. You watch, and you observe, and I believe that's the first step."

I wondered what these first steps were, and what she was talking about, or if all this was crackpot and maybe my father was right (which I believed in all my mind he wasn't), Jeanne stopped, and the hum of the air died straightaway. No sound could enter the vacuum of Burnside Bridge, it seemed, and despite my jackets the weather's wind chilled the inside of me in impossible ways, and a small whirlwind of leaves, garbage bags, plastic sacks, dust and deep, loamy earth casted off into the atmosphere and spun, spun, spun into the fading ivory light of the greenway.

"He's dead," Jeanne said.

I failed to track the passing of time, and before I knew it my watch read 2:45 and I had fifteen minutes to sprint, but my laggard and tired morning body was so unaccustomed to this lack of sleep. The push of the wind behind me did nothing. I could do nothing. I would be late.

I felt quietly for the closed hotel door in the pitch black dark, and was not surprised when, at 3:07, I sensed my father on the other side of the door somewhere, waiting for me surely, where he would ask where I was, and I would not be able to lie, for I was

a terrible liar and could not tell him anything but the truth, the truth that more than anything felt refreshing and clean like a warm bath. All these wild thoughts, these incredible mishappenings in that moment made me wonder what might stand behind that door, and whether or not I should bother opening it, or maybe I should run from him for fear of being scolded. I remembered unfondly the days leading up to now, where I stood motionless as a paper drawing blending in a background of dishwashwer grumbles, marble finishes, and Steven, who was my dog, but was loved by no one more than my mother, despite father's quiet frustrations he always had a hunch that this dog would outlive him in the relationship, and I regret to say that he was right.

Imagine: sitting at the dinner table, forking down mashed potatoes, and father asking Mom how work was in the absolute voice of calm and reason, and Mom becoming excited about her artists, the students she taught at the university, and how they were expressing themselves most excellently, and that Maria, one of her often-mentioned favorites, had planned a trip to see all of America, and that she was so, so proud, and when Father would ask more, not because he was curious, but because he was concerned that maybe I, Nickolas, would do the same and that I would receive all these wild and fallacious ideas from Mom's art students, so he would squander them now and point out the failings of it all. So yes, the night they opted for divorce, which was that very night and a sad night it was, because Mom felt my father was doing me a disservice and that if I followed him into his parade of corporate lunacy and traditional family values and all these things, she believed I would die unhappy, and I believe she knew what Jeanne really meant when she said we must all face death. We must all face death.

I opened the door to the hotel room, with a soft click and whir of the electric key, and father was not standing, but kneeling at my bedside. Not praying, but sobbing. He tugged at the sheets of my bed and held them close to his eyes, where I did not lay, and he called my mother's name to the awful ceiling scabbed over with brutal white paint. His face succumbed to the gravity of it all in a torturous blend of age and something I saw on the sun-dusted face

of Jeanne when Rafael passed away: a certain degree of loneliness.

I came to my father's side. He held me there, closer than I knew, and in breathless sobs told how he missed Mom and that he still loved her.

So yes, the night my father cried, I desired you, Portland, as all of your violence and needless death reduced to drizzle, and in rain I could handle the big black weight of the world. Such a place, such a time, felt eons away like falling into a canyon infinitely in a re-occurring dream that haunts me and pesters and shakes me awake into cold sweats, even to this day.

I just want to know how the nightmare ends, and where kindness ends and this madness of adult life begins, and is that so much to ask?